

# Muslims of the Char Areas of Assam: Perspectives on Identity and Belonging

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## Char Areas in Assam

The word "char", which has already acquired a fairly wide currency in English, especially in the writings by the Assamese, is used to refer to a tract of sandy land surfacing out of the bed of a river. Closely associated with the word "char" is the word "chapari", which, as the *Hemkosha* defines, is an alluvial "bank formed by a river" (339). In the present article, however, the term "char areas" is intended to embrace both the island chars, which are surrounded year round by waters, and the chaparis, meaning attached chars, which are connected to the mainland under normal conditions of the river. Moreover, the chars in this article refer to those created by the mighty river Brahmaputra in Assam.

In the dynamics of erosion and accretion of landmass in the river Brahmaputra, the sand bars emerging as chars create continually new promises of habitation and agricultural pursuits. Seen in this light, human habitation in the char areas is but an expectedly natural phenomenon. According to the Assam Administrative Reforms Commission, the entire stretch of the river Brahmaputra covering about 800 km in Assam has 3608 sq. km char land, which is about 4.6 per cent of the whole area of the state. The char areas are distributed in 23 Sub-Divisions falling under 14 Districts. In as many as 2251 villages within 299 Gaon Panchayats and 59 Development Blocks, the people of the char areas in Assam constitute a substantial part of Assam's population today.

## Muslims in the Ethnic Composition of the Char Areas in Assam

The Brahmaputra behaves itself at its own sweet will. If sometimes it creates hundreds of chars and chaparis, at other times it washes away vast tracts of inhabited land. The "Bar-Luit", as the Brahmaputra is referred to popularly, takes many forms - mild or mollifying, mad or even terribly violent. The community that accommodates itself to and braves these changing manifestations of the Bar-Luit is the char community of Assam.

With the exception of the char areas of Upper Assam, the great bulk of the char areas in Assam are inhabited by Muslims. Nearly ninety-five per cent of these people have their ancestral home in East Bengal, and most of them came to settle in Assam in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The Muslims of East Bengali roots apart, the char areas are

populated by a handful of low caste Bengali Hindus and a small number of farmers of Nepalese origin. A very small segment of char population comprises the indigenous Assamese as well.

It is, however, remarkable that the term "char people" in the context of the ethnic composition of Assam is almost invariably used to refer exclusively to the Muslim settlers from East Bengal, now living in the char areas of Assam. This is true of the Asam Sahitya Sabha too. It is in this sense that the sub-committee of the Assam Sahitya Sabha named "Char-Chapari Upa-Samiti" was formed in 1997 (Goswami 5-6). This approach is corroborated by the fact that the Muslims from East Bengal constitute the largest chunk of the char population, as also by the fact that other ethnic groups comprise just a tiny part of it.

## Situating the Char Community in the Larger Platter of Assamese Society

Assam is a land of resplendent hills, plains and rivers. The vast expanses of the countryside with golden crops, the deep verdant forests with resourceful animals and birds, and the Brahmaputra with its unending series of ripples and the sandy chars and chaparis make Assam a distinctive state in India. To this attractive soil of varied geographical features, people of heterogeneous ethnic groups have flocked down the ages. Just like the never-ending series of waves of the Brahmaputra, there flowed to this land wave after wave of migrants of diverse origins. The first tide of immigrants to Assam was marked with the advent of the Australoids. According to Dr. Nagen Saikia, the Australoids were Austric-speaking people, and linguistically they got divided into Austro-Asiatic and Austronesian (Saikia 141).

After the Austro-Asiatic group, came the Mongoloids. In ancient Sanskrit literature, they are referred to as the Kiratas (Das 15). The Mongoloids comprised a variety of clans, and each of them spoke languages that were distinct from another. The languages they spoke were also very different from the Indo-Aryan languages (Saikia 143). It may be noted here that there are scholars who surmise that even before the Mongoloids, a group of Dravidians had made their way into Assam. This group of people might have come to Assam after the Austrics.

It is not ascertained as to when the Aryans first migrated to Assam. But, there is no doubt that they

came after the Austric and the Mongoloid groups (Das 15). The Aryans, together with the Australoids, Mongoloids, and the Dravidians, laid the composite socio-cultural foundations of Assam.

The arrival of the Muslims in Assam also dates back to the distant past. In 1203, Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji captured Gaur, i.e. the present Bengal. He thence planned to invade Tibet. In 1206 A.D. when Bakhtiyar made his way through Kamrup, Ali Mech, a convert to Islam, became his torch-bearer (Sarkar 35-36). This suggests that Muslims had come to the land of Assam as early as or even before 1206. Later, again, as a result of battles and wars between the Sultans of Delhi and the rulers of Assam, myriads of people of the Islamic faith came to Assam and stayed behind. With time, they got assimilated to the soil, water and air of Assam. However, it is in the latter part of the nineteenth century that there was a massive flow of Muslims to Assam. The process culminated in the first half of the twentieth century. The British settled these people in the waste lands of Assam with the purpose of producing more crops and increasing revenue. The reasons for settling these people were essentially political and economic.

About the same time as the first stage of the arrival of the Muslims, the Tibeto-Burmese Shan or the Tai-Ahoms came to the Brahmaputra valley. Known as the Ahoms, this ethnic group started its reign in Assam with the conquest of this land by the first Ahom conqueror Sukapha in 1228 A.D. (Bhuyan 2). During the reign of the Ahoms, a vast chunk of the Brahmaputra valley came to be known as Asom. Prior to this, the vast expanse of the Brahmaputra valley was known by such varied names as Pragjyotishpura, Kamrupa, and so on. During the very period of Ahom rule, a large number of Aryans from the other parts of India came to this valley. The arrival of the Ahoms marks a turning point in the history of Assam. Despite being the rulers, the Ahoms adopted Assamese, the language of the ruled. With time, they lost contact with their own language, which became confined to only a few members of their priestly class called the "deodhais" (Barua 53). In this way, the process of the formation of the composite Assamese culture, and language got under way.

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### **The Melting Pot and the Cultural Mosaic**

Assam, down the ages, has been a hospitable land to numerous waves of immigrants from different parts of the world, and the diverse linguistic and cultural patterns of all these ethnic groups have melted wonderfully to form what is known to be the "Assamese Identity". It is the fusion of all these ethnic groups of people that has shaped the Assamese culture and society. Assam, in this sense, is a "melting pot", where diversities merge, converge and dissolve into a unique culture, society, and a shared identity that is distinguishably Assamese. In sociology, the "melting-pot" refers to "the idea that societies formed by immigrants from many different cultures, religions, and ethnic groups, will produce new hybrid social and cultural forms. The notion comes from the pot in which metals are melted at great heat, sometimes melding together into new compounds, with greater strength and other combined advantages." (Marshall). This term which became very popular in America in the early twentieth century is often used interchangeably with "cultural assimilation". But, the two terms are not necessarily the same as the "melting pot" metaphor might go beyond the melting of cultures to embrace even intermarriage of ethnicities, while cultural assimilation might occur, as it often does, without intermarriage.

It is worth noting that the concept of the melting pot has been challenged by the relatively new concepts of the "salad bowl" or the "cultural mosaic" and the more popular "multiculturalism." The proponents of these latter theories hold that the melting pot is rather an assertive concept denying the existence and evolution of the smaller cultures. They believe that each ethnic group has the right to maintain and preserve their own cultural distinction and integrity that does not need to assimilate or abandon their heritage in order to blend or merge into the majority culture.

But, the case in Assam is unique. Wave after wave of immigrants came to Assam, and they have gradually and naturally evolved the collective identity of the Assamese. The idea of the Assamese has never been aggressive or assertive to the minority ethnic groups. It is a shared identity, a shared sense of cultural and linguistic identity. The Ahoms stand out as a case in point. When the Ahoms came to Assam, they were the rulers and the Assamese, the ruled. The rulers could have easily imposed their language and culture upon the ruled. But, they accepted the language, culture and even

the beliefs of the Assamese. This is true of most other ethnic groups as well.

If Assam is a melting pot evolving a common, shared Assamese identity, it is, in a sense, a unique cultural mosaic too. A curious paradox as this might seem to be, this is because the individual cultures in Assam do not suffer their distinctive heritage notwithstanding a common cultural identity. Each ethnic culture retains its own peculiar, distinctive ethos, and yet, there are threads that weave the varied groups into the rich texture of the shared Assamese culture and society. The festival of Bihu, even though in its slightly differing forms, is, for example, such a thread running into every bead of the varied cultures in Assam.

The language and culture of the char people, comprising mostly the Muslim settlers from East Pakistan, are the latest ingredients in the salad bowl of Assam. They add new embellishments to the ethnic catholicity of Assam. Even as they preserve their own customs, traditions, beliefs and cultural practices as in a salad bowl, they are also melting into the larger platter of the mainstream Assamese society.

#### **Linguistic, Cultural and Literary Affinity of the Char People**

The people of the char areas of Assam register a deep affinity for the Assamese language, culture and literature. They might have come last down the annals of the history of immigration to Assam. But, they have always put the Assamese language and culture above their own.

On the question of a choice of their language, they have always stood in favour of Assamese. Language is the vehicle through which a nation speaks for its cultural and social standing. It is through the medium of language that the wealth of literature of a society nourishes itself. In today's world, if we speak of a society or nation, we consider it in terms of its language, and not in terms of its religion and other thoughts. This is because language plays a vital role in the socio-cultural and economic progress of a nation.

Be it during the Language Movement of the 1960s or the Medium Movement of 1972, the char dwellers have always extended their uninhibited support to the cause of the Assamese language. It is true that their roots are traceable to East Bengal, but there is not a single Bengali Medium school in the entire range of the char areas inhabited by the Muslim settlers, let alone Hindi or English Medium schools. Thus, at a time when there is a mushroom growth of English Medium schools even in the areas inhabited by the indigenous Assamese, the char areas are still beaming with the light of the Assamese language.

The Muslims of the char areas of Assam took a landmark decision when the whole myriad of them declared Assamese as their mother tongue in the Census

of 1951. It was because of this momentous decision that within a span of two decades, that is, from 1931 to 1951, the strength of the Assamese-speaking population grew from barely 31.4 per cent to as big a figure as 56.7 per cent. Thus, Assamese became the language of the majority in Assam and it acquired the status of the State language (Chakroborty and Chattopadhyaya 62).

Culturally, again, the people of the char areas have assimilated themselves into the greater Assamese community. Cultural programmes on important days like Rabha Divas and Jyoti Divas are organised with great zeal and fervour in char areas as in the rest of Assam. Moreover, the national festival of Assam, Bihu, is observed with pomp and gaiety in the char areas as well. Today, Bihu songs and Bihu dance form an integral part of the cultural life of the char dwellers.

In the field of Assamese literature, again, the writers of the char areas of Assam have rendered notable contributions. Poetry, novels, short stories, essays, drama, criticism, biography, children's literature - in all these genres, the contribution of the writers of the char areas towards Assamese literature is noteworthy. The char areas, particularly of lower Assam, have bathed in the radiance of literary persons like Imdad Ullah, Aaur Rahman, M. Elim Uddin Dewan, Ismail Hussain (Senior), Ismail Hossain (Junior), Dr. Rezaul Karim, Dr. Ahijuddin Sheikh, Zamser Ali, Kashema Khatun, and a host of others. Imdad Ullah's *Srijan Aru Manan* (1976) is a unique gift to the field of Assamese literary criticism. *Samiksakar Dristire* and *Kabitar Sabisex*, also penned by him, are two more works of great value in Assamese literature. Writers like Zamser Ali, Imran Hussain, Dr. Ahijuddin Sheikh and Kashema Khatun have also made their mark by virtue of their significant contributions to Assamese literature. The last three decades particularly have witnessed the flourish of scores writes in char areas of lower Assam. Even as these writers have thrown a flood of light on the char life and society, they have in truth enriched the wealth of Assamese literature.

#### **The Question of Identity**

There is, thus, no doubt that the people of the char areas are an integral part of the larger Assamese life today. However, ethnically and anthropologically, these people belong to a stock, which, being identical with that of a neighbouring country, often leads to an unwanted confusion and thereby a crisis of their identity. While interviewed by this author, most of the char dwellers sounded aggrieved at this confusion, and expressed their helplessness on that count. One of them, Liakat Ali, a rickshaw puller in Guwahati, went even to the extent of deploring the fact that his younger brother, who was a Government employee in the city, was accepted as a respectable Assamese citizen in every society, while he was branded as a Bangladeshi by many. Liakat is just a single person named here. There are hundreds of these people for whom the Assamese

identity is a mere construct that pushes them to the margins of society, and make them feel helplessly as "the Other" in their own land. It is therefore perceived that in so far as the question of identity is concerned, within this ethnic community, economic, social and political privileges make all the difference. On a positive note, however, this sense of alienation is being healed by their growing interactions with the mainstream Assamese society, and the space that the char community has come to acquire with time is visibly bright today.

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